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ABSTRACT

The speaker outlines some of the difficulties in education that have prompted educators to search for alternative approaches, offers guidelines for the implementation of alternatives, and outlines the alternatives available in the Teaneck, New Jersey, schools. (IRT)

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SPEAKER Merseau, Ann R. CLINIC NO. A-13 PROGRAM p. 26

ALTERNATIVES IN EDUCATION

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David Tyack pointed out in his book The One Best System that the complexities of administering educational programs in large cities prompted educators to strive for "uniformity of excellence." It was believed that the major task of educators was to perfect the system to reflect corporate-like efficiency. Thus, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, John D. Philbrich proselytized the point of view that the best educational system was one in which decision-making powers were concentrated at the top with directives flowing down and reports emanating from the bottom. A model for such a system was found in Joseph Lancaster's plan to educate Boston's poor children through the use of monitors and carefully prescribed course of study. Lancaster's plan was to be adopted by the philanthropic New York Public School Society and, "... as the population of the city expanded, it simply built additional identical schools under a centralized structure of control." Over the years, this assembly line-like corporate model was to be expanded into a monolithic public education system covering the entire United States. The system serviced well the needs of industrialized society by stressing uniformity, punctuality, attention, and silence. David Tyack writes:

> To see how such qualities were taught in the classroom, let us accompany some observers as they visited actual urban schools during the latter half of the nineteenth century. A Scottish writer, David MacRae, reported what he saw in Ward School No. 50 in New York City

EA 009 157

in the late 1860's. At the morning assembly, the room was filled with 500 to 600 children between the ages of five and twelve. MacRae was impressed with their appearance: "They were neatly (many of them beautifully) dressed and all scrupulously clean-a point to which great attention is paid in American schools. Any scholar coming with untidy clothes, or with unwashed face or hands, or unbrushed hair, would be sent home at once." The children were perfectly quiet when the principal took her place and conducted the object lesson for the day. "We are to think of its qualities, parts, uses, colours, and form," replied the pupils in unison. She then showed the children a clay pipe. After the children had said what they knew about pipe and the evils of tobacco, the principal rang a small bell, thereby announcing the close of the lesson. The mass of pupils "rose and moved off with military precision to their various recitation rooms." The principal explained to MacRae that she had achieved such careful order by appealing to the self-respect and sense of shame of the students. As he went with her to the recitation rooms, he found children eagerly competing with one another. After the teacher gave them a problem in arithmetic "everyone dashed into the calculation with a rapidity of an excited terrier chasing a ball" to see which one could come up with the right answer first. In the reading lesson, the teacher stressed an exaggerated articulation of each word so that the students might escape linguistic delinquency. They were no more allowed to be slovently in their pronunciation than in their appearance.

In 1867, a committee appointed by the Baltimore school board visited the public schools in Philadelphia, New York, Brooklyn, and Boston. Like MacRae, they were impressed by classrooms in New York City.

...The regularity of movement in so large a number of children, all well dressed, and many of them tastefully attired, was truly interesting. The visitors were delighted with the children's "simultaneous enunciation," and the way in which "a thousand little forms are as erect in their seats, as though they were rivetted there by some process of mecha-

> nism." In Boston, likewise, the Baltimore visitors applauded the order that they discovered in the operation of the Emerson School: "Every pupil appears to be in anxious waiting for the word of the teacher, and when issued it is promply obeyed by the class. The movements and utterances of the class are as nearly simultaneous and similar as they can be."

These military-like characteristics of the American school system have led writers such as Charles Reich to complaint that the sytem, as of the early 1970's was still ensnared in an industrial revolutionary consciousness rendering it incapable of responding to current societal and individual needs. It may be said after Alvin Toffler, that America's unitary educational system is suffering from what may be called "future shock" - the inability to cope brought on by an accelerating pace of social and technological change. The present static distribution of educational resources is simply inappropriate to adequately service human needs in an emerging super-industrailized world.

Some futurists have argued however, that it may not be realistic to expect man and his social systems to continually tolerate the increasing complexities of a super-industrial society. As an alternative, some propose a post-industrialized society where the rate of technical and social change is controlled. Yet, a basic theory of the super-industralists is that man would be <u>incapable</u> of containing the proliferation of social accommodations precipitated by technological advances even if he desired to do so.

These cogent arguments suggest, nevertheless, that

the public education system must be adapted to meet the germane needs of a super-industralized or a post-industralized society. Still another approach might be to ask what future do we desire and to build our educational system to realize that future. Alternatives that address problems of global goverance, interpersonal relationships, ecological imbalance, and free choice might be considered. Central to this approach would be a consideration of whether the school system should promote freedom of expression, encourage respect for individual and cultural differences, and provide for an equitable delivery of services based on need or whether it is to be stultifying, dehumanizing, divisive and generally undemocratic.

A firm commitment to the tenets of democracy and the dictates of an emerging culture provide the bases upon which to predicate a need for change. In spite of the noteworthy accomplishments of America's public educational system, there is growing evidence that for many, the present system simply does not work. Children from low-income families and those of minority group status are systematically identified based on their poor record of school attendance and achievement. More than one million youths ages 12 to 17 cannot read at the beginning fourth-grade level. A 1975 Office of Education study indicated that more than half of American adults are either incompetent or barely competent in the minimal skills necessary for survival in contemporaty society.

Vernon Smith et. al. in Alternatives in Education reported that more than a million students have dropped out of school before graduation from high school each year since 1960.

These dropouts are from all levels of ability and socioeconomic status. While there has long been a general consensus that the system has not worked well for minorities and the underprivil-edged, it appears more and more that children of the white middle-class are too experiencing difficulties in succeeding in school. It was reported at a 1975 NEA Conference that 33 percent of white students from middle-class homes and 45 per-cent of black students from poor families fail to receive grades of C or better.

Recently, Congress has expressed its concern for diverse groups by passing legislation related to education of the handicapped, the culturally different, and the gifted and talented. If the dream of cultural pluralism is to be the sine qua non of the American heritage, and if public education is to continue to be the chief purveyor of the culture, than drastic alternatives are needed to make this dream a reality. There is no better way to ensure that democracy is the legacy of future generations, than to afford each citizen the right to choose from among many real alternatives in a matter as important as educating the youth. Each child, regardless of his personal inclinations or social circumstances, must be pro-vided the opportunity to develop his skills to the fullest potential and to experience the instrinsic delight of self-fulfillment.

To institute alternatives in a system fraught with vested interest, legal entanglements, and an adversion to change, however, is no easy task. A positive sign, nevertheless, is that there is an emerging cadre of educators and social

planners who have dared to advocate reform in public education. It is suspected that the zill of many is kindled by the realization that recalcitrance, in a long run, could render the system totally ineffectual.

In spite of the current fiscal restraints on the implementation of new programs, there appears to be a growing acceptance of the alternative school concept. A 1973 Gallop Poll of Attitudes Towards Education indicated that more than 60 percent of the parents and professional educators responding favored some form of alternative school for students who are performing poorly in the regular school. In 1975 California became the first state to mandate the establishment of alternative public schools. States such as Illinois and Pennsylvania have endorsed plans for the creation of alternatives to the traditional school. In 1974 New York City developed an optional unzoned school program in elementary, intermediate, and junior high schools. Noteworthy too is the Grand Rapids school system which now offers an alternative to the regular school program on each grade level. The optional school movement and action learning programs have also received support from several national commissions.

It is evident that when confronted with the harsh realities of a persuasive decline in school performance, educators as well as parents will be receptive to educational change. The key to success is in adopting a change strategy which considers all of the variables operative in each situation. Attempts to generalize from successful models has proven unproductive. In other words, there are inherent pitfalls in

assuming that a program can be replicated simply because it worked as a pilot project.

As a general rule, however, there should be a consideration of the following forces acting on an innovation:

1. Parental and community support for the alternative school may be won by:

    a. Including parents in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the program.

    b. Allaying concerns over the rising cost of education by seeking other than local public funds to support the alternative school or maintain a level of spending that is commensurate with per capita cost in the regular school.

    c. Making the school a truly participatory venture by involving existing community organizations in establishing and administering the program.

    d. Ensuring that the special school is genuinely an alternative to, and does not supplant the regular school.

2. The support of educators may be solicited by:

    a. Ensuring that all involved in the implementation of the innovation fully understand the rationale employed in its design and have a firm grasp of their expected role.

    b. Making participation voluntary on the part of teachers and administrators.

    c. Maintaining an openness towards visitation by educators in the regular schools and holding workshops for them to heighten their awareness of tne alternative.

As previously stated, there seems to be significant acceptance of the alternative school concept, but, the statistics do not tell us how many parents are anxious to place there children in alternative schools. The stigma of the alternative school as a place for problem children will have

to be overcome through a massive community relations effort. Also, educators must be made aware that there is not always one best system for achieving the goals of education and that alternative schools are complimentary to the regular school and not a competitor Boards of education must endeavor to ensure that a proposed alternative school does not supplant the regular school, for then, a student is denied the choice of the regular school program.

The promise of America's future lies in the extent to which the fullest potential of young people is realized. Whether the country follows a path of democratic governance and make allowances for individual difference or whether some future generation will reap the dispair of totalitarianism may well rest with the kind of socialization process schools promote.

Within the context of a society predicated on free choice, alternative schools and regular schools have room to flourish -- each offering its own kind of learning experience to meet the diverse needs of young Americans.

ALTERNATIVES IN TEANECK, N.J.

The Teaneck Board of Education has for some time been committed to alternatives in education.

At the high school level, alternatives include Alternative I housed at the Bryant Elementary School; Alternative II, a cluster school within the regular high school; the county regional satellite experience; the cooperative work/study programs; and the Bergen County Technical and Vocational High School located in Hackensack. Two other alternatives involving secondary students, are the Communications Workshop and the After-School Program. Next year the After-School programs will become a regular day program, and become known as the Half-Time Day Program.

Alternative I, a learning community of 110 junior and senior students and seven teachers. is approximatley four years old. The concept emerged initially from the high school student/staff Senate and took more than one and a half years of planning by a student/teacher/administrator committee. The student body represents a mosaic of the regular high school with students of different backgrounds, interests, and aspirations. There are no entrance requirements, except that the individual expresses a desire to have more responsibility for his own learning, wants an experience different from the regular high school, and is willing to make a commitment to the goals and philosophical principles of the Alternative School. Pupils are admitted to the school because they wish to be there.

A dedicated faculty provides students with experiences in English, social studies, math, foreign language, psychology,

and art. Courses in science and other specialized areas are taught at the high school, since facilities do not exist for some programs at Bryant. Very often, courses are team taught by teachers, a teacher and a student or by a teacher and a community resource specialist. At the present time the school is under the direction of a teacher-coordinator, who is responsible to the high school principal. Although there is no counselor physically housed at the Alternative School, a great deal of counseling services are provided by the high school. The Director of Guidance visits the school at least one half day per week and in addition, often schedules conferences in the guidance office at the high school. A great deal of the day to day counseling is provided by the teachers through seminars and social contact.

The school, run on a trimester basis, offers a wide variety of experiences. The major difference between the regular high school and the alternative school is that the student has increased choices in which educational goals are to be met. In addition, the individual enjoys greater control and independence in the use of time and life-space.

In many instances, basic requirements are met and enriched experiences are provided through courses, many of which are suggested by students. Some of the courses include The First Amendment: Social and Literary Perspectives, The Living Law, Photography, Drama, Poetry, Social Commentary in Literature Humor, Controversy, the English Novel, Feminist Studies, A study of the Theories of Emotions, the Art of Writing, among others. A rich and varied program is offered in basic

and advanced English and math. The foreign languages offered include French, Spanish, Russian, German, and Latin.

In addition to taking courses at the Alternative School, some students have chosen to take experiences at Fairleigh Dickinson, our local university. Much of this work is done through the cooperative efforts of student, teacher, and university staff. Other students engage in special independent study projects of their interest. Still others may serve in apprenticeships or internships in the community or surrounding areas. Internships have taken place in hospitals, elementary classrooms, courtrooms, museums, and other locations.

During the past few years the Alternative School have sponsored a number of innovative programs. Last year it assumed a national leadership role and hosted an alternative school convention. Students and staff from alternative schools in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Virginia, and Massachusetts were in attendance. The purpose of the meeting, much of which took place on a weekend, was to share ideas and to assist students and staff in exploring future directions for alternative education.

At the end of a recent trimester, the Alternative School sponsored a two week period of intensification. This experience gave each student the opportunity to focus on one specific area of study. Such study could be done through an intensification course, an apprenticeship or an independent study project. In order to provide the necessary structure, those who chose apprenticenships or independent study were required to design a contract with a staff member in which goals

were stated, methods of accomplishing goals were presented, and plans for evaluation were described. Contracts were given approval by a student/teacher committee, and in each case the student was required to keep a log of activities.

During the period of intensification, students participated in courses entitled Play Production, A Study Of Alternative Education, A Newspaper Without Words, Impressionistic Art, Environmental Architecture, and Community and Ethnic Studies. Independent study was done on music history, law, fashion design, filmmaking, and other areas. Some apprenticeships were done in auto mechanics, dance, biology, teaching, hospital work and advertising. The locations for some of these experiences were the Bergen County Courthouse, a biology lab at Columbia, and a New York museum.

In addition to academic experiences, students learn a great deal through involvement in the governance of the school, and through such groups as the Town Meeting and Seminar. Town meeting is a coming together of all students and staff which occurs once a week, and which gives everyone the opportunity to discuss any issue of community interest. Originally, it got its name from the New England Town Meeting, since it is an experience in direct democracy. The seminar is a small group of students, who meet regularly with a staff member. Its purpose is to foster group guidance or to discuss any matter which might be of significance to students on the school, local, state or national scene.

Studies on the Alternative School reveal that the school is meeting its goals. A large percentage of the students continue to achieve success in the world of work and in higher education. They have had the opportunity to get to known themselves, and to develop positive attitudes toward school and learning.

And, most of all, Alternative I is widely accepted by parents, the staff, and student body!